

## “People’s Poland” in the Third Polish Republic

**Barbara Fedyszak-Radziejowska**

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I would like to reflect on the problem of easy acceptance by my younger colleagues—those in their thirties and forties—of certain mechanisms of social life disadvantageous for democracy and for the Polish community. From whence comes their ever-increasing consent to the imperfections of democracy in Poland?

Whenever I am confronted with long-winded statements saying that marketing, persuasion, public relations, globalization, and the media help usher in innovation and change the world for the better, I hear old-fashioned propaganda not unlike that so freely distributed in People’s Poland.

### The “fit to govern”

I see “People’s Poland” [Soviet-occupied Poland, 1945–89, *Ed.*] as a structure in which the mechanisms of power left deep tracks in the social fabric, and in the way society is envisioned by the elites and sometimes by ordinary people. These tracks are so deep that, in spite of many achievements of the last twenty years, we apparently skid back into them all too often. They are beginning to determine the direction in which we move forward; and it is not a democratic direction. People’s Poland was a country in which a single political party enjoyed the monopoly of power and where elections amounted to the play of appearances. Yes, there existed a fake “united front” of several parties; and one could also say that there are different kinds of democracies. Some are based on competition and contest, others resemble a cartel of elites. In Germany one observes a consultative and deliberative democracy in which SPD formed a grand coalition with CDU and CSU while putting aside grand competition. But People’s Poland can be described as a political entity where there was one dominant party that “concessed” a certain number of Catholics, members of ZSL [United Peasant Party], and members of SD [Democratic Bloc]. What was the defining

feature of that system? The vertical monopoly of the Polish United Workers Party [Communist Party]. Only one party wielded power, while the remainder were a show of appearances.

### The Round Table sucked communist mechanisms into the structures of the Third Republic.

Now let us look at the situation today. It appears that in all of the recent elections there has been only one party that “deserved” power in the opinion of certain powerful members of the elite. It was variously named: Freedom Union [Unia Wolności], or Democratic Union [Unia Demokratyczna], or Civic Platform [Platforma Obywatelska]. Occasionally, the Union of the Democratic Left [the former communist party] also received the designation of being worthy. In slapping such labels on a certain group of parties, the elites have behaved as if political parties were not in a sense “equal,” but rather arranged in the same way in which they were arranged in Soviet-occupied Poland. This is a replay of the People’s Poland vision of one, enlightened, and excellent party that is the most progressive and most forward-looking of all. This narrative existed in People’s Poland, and it is being reintroduced today. As one observes persons in public life and their image in the media, one comes to the conclusion that the opinion makers take it for granted that only one party is enlightened, only one is conceived by the best minds and is supported by the best people.

However, since democracy requires that there be more than one party and more than one proposed solution, these “other” parties have begun to appear in the public square in the same order in which the supplementary “parties” did in People’s Poland. The arrangement there was not horizontal but vertical. We are beginning to duplicate this in free Poland. The alleged legitimacy of this one-and-only party has its roots in ideology rather than achievement—and that too duplicates the situation in People’s Poland. The tenor of public discussion suggests that there exists only one correct ideology, only one narrative about the past, present, and future. In People’s Poland one could in private say that the Polish officers in Katyn were murdered by the Russians, but such private talk was of no consequence. What was important was the dominant narrative that kept repeating what was obligatory in those days—namely, that Katyn was a German crime. We do not have to say that today, but there are other issues that “the leading party” and the leading media suggest are beyond discussion.

### Manipulating self-assessment

In People's Poland *demos*, or the people, had no controlling mechanisms at its disposal. It was impossible to put into motion a procedure that would introduce social control of the establishment. This was the very essence of totalitarianism in Soviet-occupied Poland. Perhaps there exists a certain continuum between totalitarianism and democracy. Look at Russia; in spite of all the drawbacks Russia has political parties and an almost independent press, and so it is somewhat democratic. There is a different kind of democracy in Mexico, and still another in the United States. All these democracies have their characteristic mechanisms that allow a measure of popular control over the elites. With regard to Poland, the question is which mechanisms are excessively present here, and which are lacking.

In order to rule People's Poland, the communists needed a society that did not believe in itself and thought badly about itself. To use a psychological expression, it needed a society whose members had low self-esteem individually and collectively. A society whose identity was degraded, whose Polishness was degraded. People who trust in themselves and have a sense of self-esteem demand a great deal from those who rule them. It is relatively easy to rule a society that perceives itself as worse than others. In such a society citizens do not imagine themselves as acting subjects, as individuals generating events and steering them.

This sense of self-worth has also been under attack after regaining freedom, and it is related to the issue of only one party being worthy and respectable. An example that comes to mind is related to the recent elections to EU Parliament. At that time, the Germans engineered a series of events aimed at lowering the sense of self-worth in Poles [the author has in mind issues related to Erika Steinbach and the Center commemorating the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II. *Ed.*]. These series of steered events were truly masterpieces. We were reminded by the Germans—*watch out, you dears, a bit more cheek and you will become the makers of World War II, the cause of German and Jewish suffering*. I am not indignant. I see a technique of social manipulation in this, a brilliant technique. What is the best method of increasing one's own sense of self-worth? Find a group of people sufficiently incapacitated to be unable to respond in kind to one's concerted effort to rewrite their narrative about themselves.

People's Poland was constructed with the use of similar psychological techniques. After the Second

World War the Polish sense of self-worth was dealt a powerful blow. The trial of sixteen leaders of Polish Resistance in Moscow [18–21 June 1945] was organized in such a way as to make it impossible for anyone in Poland to proclaim that they were heroes and not criminals. Heroes were declared to be criminals, they were imprisoned and hanged. Hardly anyone in the West wishes to remember the weight and implications of the Moscow trial and execution of sixteen members of the Polish political elite in June 1945. Few nations have had so many reasons to be proud of their behavior in the Second World War; few experienced the taking away of this glory so brutally. Why? It was necessary to paralyze the nation and make it disbelieve in its own strength, for this was the condition necessary to tyrannize it for many years and get away with it.

### The indignant students

It appears to me that in spite of the end of communism and its ideology "supported by the working class," the mechanisms of power developed in those times still present a danger. They lead to a revival of structures that have little in common with democracy, the sense of self-worth of individual members of society, and the common good. Those who are trying to persuade Poles that there is only one "correct" narrative of postcommunist times, that the Round Table and the Mazowiecki government are the most important elements of this narrative, still dream of reintroducing a narrow and self-perpetuating elite, the one-and-only group of people that allegedly acquired at the Round Table the permission to rule Poland. But this proposed narrative pushes aside other events, infinitely more important than the Round Table.

The elections of June 4, 1989 were an event whose significance cannot be overestimated. Sixty-two percent of Poles went to the voting booth, and from the choices on the voting list they selected only those that spelled real democracy. They voted *exclusively* for the Solidarity candidates. They *rejected* the Round Table. They did something wonderful and to this day they do not know that they did. They do not know that they should celebrate the Fourth of June. But the narrative they are fed by the big media insists on a different story, one in which the Round Table is central.

Why is vetting [of former communists] impossible to accomplish? Why is it so difficult to defeat corruption? Because both vetting and the fight against corruption are mechanisms serving to control the elites. What is vetting, from a sociological point of view? It

is a test asking whether certain citizens deserve to be members of my country's elite. The process cannot be brought to a conclusion for the reasons sketched above.

The Round Table sucked communist mechanisms into the structures of the Third Republic. It assured that the process of vetting could not be completed. It implicitly declared that vetting is unnecessary. But what is vetting? It is a process in which *demos*, or ordinary people, dare to exercise its control over the elites and says, "I am checking your credentials." And what is the struggle against corruption? It is an effort by the *demos* to check how you govern the country. Not where you come from, but how you govern.

In my pedagogical work I meet students who are indignant over the fact that a law exists in Poland that allows people who offered a bribe to report on the person who took it, and not be punished for offering a bribe. In other words, some of my students consider it scandalous that one can fight corruption. They consider it a provocation and demand punishment for the bribe giver even if the goal was to catch the bribe taker. How could you have done this to Mrs. Sawicka [a public personality involved in taking bribes], they say. These students are not communists, they are simply students majoring in administration and finance. They will work in the public sector. Why do they think this way? Because they have been persuaded that the elites should not be controlled. Mrs. Sawicka was a member of the elite, and therefore she should be untouchable. The elites should be immune to the process of having their credentials checked.

And yet, without the egalitarian ethos democracy withers. Why cannot we make that ethos more pervasive? Let us look back at People's Poland. It was then that the vertical construct of the "multiple political parties" came into being. These parties were not equal and could not compete for power. Power was reserved for the "enlightened" elite, or the communist party. The others were assigned roles on the stage. Is a similar system in place today? I invite you all to ponder that question. ♦



A Polish country manor in the Wilno area before World War II.  
Louise A. Boyd, *Polish Countrysides* (NY, 1937).

## The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt War Through a Woman's Eyes, 1939–1940

**By Rulka Langer.** 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Los Angeles, CA and Crowborough, Sussex, UK: Aquila Polonica ([www.AquilaPolonica.com](http://www.AquilaPolonica.com)), 2009. 485 pages. Illustrations. ISBN 978-1-60772-003-3. Hardcover.

### Brian Domitrovic

“You know. . . I always thought that the trouble with me was that I had led a too-protected life. Home, school, the university, [my job at] the bank, well, all that is not what people call real life. I used to crave for some real experience. I certainly have it now. If you only knew what I’ve seen. . . I can’t tell you. . . it’s too atrocious, but. . . I didn’t know human bodies contained so much blood.” These words were spoken to Rulka Langer by her friend and co-worker Tomek Małachowski in Warsaw in late September 1939. Four weeks before, at the beginning of September, the two friends were at work at a bank when news came that the children of one of their office mates had been killed, and his wife maimed, by a German bomb. The most the two friends could do was shake hands with this gentleman. Between these two occurrences at the beginning and end of September 1939, as Germany attacked Poland, there was only more of the same across Warsaw and the nation at large: bombs, fires, building collapses, panic baptisms in tent-city maternity wards, want, death, dismemberment, mania. And it was, of course, only the beginning of Poland’s troubles.

In 1942, a remarkable book was published in the United States, in English, by the first-hand witness to these events, Rulka Langer. In *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* Langer chronicled her experiences in the Warsaw maelstrom, from August 1939 until her departure in early 1940 for the United States, where her husband was on diplomatic assignment. Last year *Mermaid* was republished by Aquila Polonica, the publishing house dedicated to resurrecting rich but forgotten memoirs of the extreme Polish experience of 1939–1945.

It is impossible to read *The Mermaid and the Messerschmitt* without two thoughts coming to mind.